CLAIMS

We claim:

5   1.   A method for gathering information on the Internet, comprising:

receiving an electronic request from one or more users for a specification of a product or service desired by the one or more users via an input form provided by a server;

determining vendors who potentially possess the good or service of interest to the one or more users; and

10   interest to the one or more users; and

outputting e-mails to said vendors requesting information about said good or service.

2.   The method of claim 1 wherein the step of determining comprises:

15   searching a database having at least a relationship between key words searched by the one or more users and a set of vendors.

3.   The method of claim 1 wherein the step of determining comprises searching the Internet using a commercially available search engine.

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4.   The method of claim 3 further including the step of extracting emails from a set of results of said searching.

5.   The method of claim 1 wherein the step of determining comprises

25   searching a database having at least a relationship between key words searched by the one or more users and a set of vendors and searching the Internet using a commercially available search engine.

6. The method of claim 1 further including the step of receiving e-mails from vendors interested in selling the good or service to the one or more users.

5   7. The method of claim 6 further including the step of outputting vendor information to the one or more users.

8. The method of claim 6 further including the step of updating a datastore with weighting information on vendors.

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9. The method of claim 1 wherein the method is performed on a server coupled to the Internet.

10. A method for conducting commerce, comprising:

15   receiving requests from one or more users comprising a list of hits and a specification of a product or service desired by the one or more users;

outputting e-mails to vendors identified in the list as potentially possessing the good or service for sale to the one or more users;

receiving e-mails from vendors interested in selling the good or service to

20   the one or more users; and

outputting vendor information to the one or more users.

11. The method of claim 10 wherein the step of receiving includes receiving a descriptor file containing the product specification.

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12. The method of claim 11 wherein the descriptor file is formatted in XML.

13. The method of claim 11 wherein the descriptor file is encrypted.

14.   The method of claim 10 wherein said steps are performed on a server coupled to the Internet.

5   15.   The method of claim 14 wherein the step of receiving comprises receiving an e-mail including an encrypted descriptor file from a customer agent on a user device.

16.   The method of claim 15 wherein the descriptor file includes e-mail
10   addresses extracted from the list of hits.

17.   The method of claim 10 wherein the step of outputting e-mails is performed by a user device.

15   18.   The method of claim 10 wherein the step of outputting e-mails includes providing an intermediary e-mail address not associated with said one or more users.

19.   The method of claim 10 wherein said step of receiving e-mails from
20   vendors is performed by the server.

20.   The method of claim 10 wherein said step of receiving e-mails from vendors is performed by a user device.

25   21.   The method of claim 10 wherein the step of outputting vendor information includes outputting each e-mail received from vendors.

22.   The method of claim 10 wherein the step of outputting vendor information includes outputting a summary of the e-mail received from vendors.

23.   The method of claim 10 further including the step of receiving a request from a user to purchase a product or service and performing a monetary exchange between the user and the vendor.

5   24.   A method for conducting commerce on the Internet, comprising:
       providing a customer agent including a keyword search field, a transaction type selector, and a descriptor file generator; and
       providing a control server including a receiver for customer agent query results based on input in the keyword search field, the input comprising a good or
10   service, the query results contained in an e-mail including an encrypted descriptor file, the control server including an e-mail generator forwarding queries to merchants generated as a result of a keyword search.

25.   The method of claim 24 wherein the step of providing includes
15   providing a software agent operable on a processing device.

26.   The method of claim 24 wherein the step of providing includes providing a World Wide Web based server and programming code operable in a Web browser.

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27.   The method of claim 24 further including the step of providing a merchant agent.

28.   The method of claim 24 wherein the merchant agent is integrated
25   with the customer agent.

29.   The method of claim 24 wherein the step of providing a customer agent includes providing an encryption routine for the descriptor file, and the step

of providing a control server includes providing a decryption routine for the descriptor file.

30. A method for conducting business over the Internet, comprising:

generating a descriptor file in an independent data format, the file including a description of an item for which information is sought by a user;

encrypting the descriptor file;

forwarding the descriptor file with clear text description information to a plurality of vendors;

receiving, from a subset of a plurality of vendors, information about the item; and

outputting the information about the item received to the user.

31. The method of claim 30 wherein the independent data format is XML.

32. The method of claim 30 wherein the step of encrypting is performed on a user device.

33. The method of claim 30 wherein the step of forwarding is performed by an intermediate server.

34. The method of claim 33 wherein the step of forwarding comprises forwarding the descriptor file by e-mail.

35. The method of claim 34 wherein the step of forwarding further includes the step of not forwarding information to vendors indicating they do not wish to receive such information.

36.   The method of claim 30 wherein the step of forwarding is performed by a user device and the method includes a step of granting permission to a user device to selectively perform said step of forwarding.

5   37.   The method of claim 30 wherein the step of generating includes running a World Wide Web search using a search engine and recording results of the search.

38.   The method of claim 37 wherein the step of generating includes

10   extracting e-mail addresses from the results.

39.   The method of claim 30 wherein the step of receiving includes receiving information by e-mail.

15   40.   The method of claim 30 wherein said step of outputting comprises outputting e-mails received from said vendors.

41.   The method of claim 30 wherein said step of outputting comprises outputting an aggregate of e-mails containing said information about the item.

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42.   A system for conducting business over the Internet, comprising:

at least one user agent including a search engine interface and a description file generator, coupled to a network; and

a control server coupled to the network to receive descriptor files provided

25   by the customer agent, the control server administering transmission of a descriptor file to merchants coupled to the network.

43.   The system of claim 42 wherein the at least one user agent includes at least a customer agent and a merchant agent.

44.   The system of claim 42 wherein the at least one user customer agent includes an agent operable in a Web browser application.

5   45.   The system of claim 42 wherein the at least one agent includes code operable on a processing device.

46.   The system of claim 42 wherein the at least one user agent and the server include a description file encryptor and decryptor.

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47.   The system of claim 42 wherein the description file generator outputs a description file in Extensible Markup Language.

48.   The system of claim 42 wherein the at least one user agent
15   includes an e-mail address extractor.

49.   The system of claim 42 wherein the control server includes a blocked merchant database.

20   50.   The system of claim 42 wherein the user agent transmits the descriptor file to merchants and the control server includes a user agent controller controlling transmission of the descriptor file.

51.   The system of claim 42 wherein the control server transmits the
25   descriptor file to merchants and the control server includes an e-mail server controlling transmission of the descriptor file.

52.   One or more processor readable storage devices having processor readable code embodied on said processor readable storage devices, said

processor readable code for programming one or more processors to perform a method for conducting a transaction on the Internet, comprising:

receiving input from a user regarding a product or service of interest to the user;

5 interacting with a search engine to retrieve hits resulting from keyword input to said search engine;

generating a descriptor file for the product or service;

extracting e-mail addresses of site hits resulting from said search; and

forwarding e-mails to said e-mail addresses including a request for 10 additional information regarding the good or service of interest.

53. One or more processor readable storage devices in accordance with claim 52 wherein the step of generating the descriptor file includes 15 formatting the file in XML.

54. One or more processor readable storage devices in accordance with claim 52 wherein the step of generating the descriptor file includes encrypting the file.

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55. One or more processor readable storage devices in accordance with claim 52 wherein the step of forwarding comprises forwarding an encrypted descriptor file from a customer agent on a user device.

25 56. One or more processor readable storage devices in accordance with claim 52 wherein the descriptor file includes e-mail addresses extracted from the hits.

57.   One or more processor readable storage devices in accordance with claim 52 wherein the method further includes the step of receiving e-mails from vendors responsive to the request.

5   58.   One or more processor readable storage devices in accordance with claim 57 wherein the method further includes outputting each e-mail received from vendors to the user.

59.   One or more processor readable storage devices in accordance with claim 52 wherein the method includes a summary of the e-mails received from vendors to the user.

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